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ABSTRACT

This digest is concerned with the need to develop standards and infrastructure for improving the employment, placement, preparation, and supervision of paraeducators in inclusive general and special education classrooms, Title I, multilingual/English as a Second Language, and early childhood programs. It discusses teacher responsibilities for directing and integrating paraeducators, and the need for policies and infrastructures to strengthen teacher and paraeducator teams. A list of essential policy questions that are central to the conceptualization and implementation of a comprehensive system for professional development for paraeducators is provided. Questions address: (1) the identification of the roles of paraeducators; (2) standards for preparing paraeducators; (3) credentialing systems; (4) standards for the supervision of paraeducators; (5) the impact of federal, state, and local mandates and funding on the employment, training, and supervision of paraeducators; and (6) the current roles of different educational institutions and parents in setting standards for paraeducator utilization, development, credentialing, and supervision. The digest concludes by calling for different governmental and non-governmental organizations to form partnerships to address these policy questions, and work in concert to develop and maintain infrastructures that will ensure that both teachers and paraeducators are appropriately and effectively prepared for their roles and responsibilities. (CR)

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Paraeducators: Factors That Influence Their Performance, Development, and Supervision

Anna Lou Pickett

This Digest is concerned with an important but under-recognized issue confronting the field: the need to develop standards and infrastructures for improving the employment, placement, preparation and supervision of paraeducators in inclusive general and special education classrooms, Title I, multilingual/ESL, and early childhood programs. Paraprofessional, teacher aide/assistant, transition trainer, home visitor, education technician, therapy aide/assistant are some of the other titles assigned to school employees:

- whose positions are either instructional in nature or who provide other direct services to children, youth and/or their families;
- who work under the supervision of teachers or other professional practitioners who are responsible for the design, implementation, and assessment of learner progress and the evaluation of learning programs and related services for children, youth and/or their families (Pickett, 1989).

It has been more than 40 years since "teacher aides" were introduced into classrooms to enable teachers to spend more time in planning and implementing instructional and related activities. A survey of Chief State School Officers conducted in 1999 by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals indicates that there are more than 500,000 full-time equivalency paraeducator positions in all programs administered by local education agencies (LEAs) across the country (Pickett, 1999). The duties of teacher aides are no longer limited to recordkeeping, preparing materials, monitoring students in lunchrooms and study halls, or maintaining learning centers and equipment. Today there are active participants in the instructional process and the delivery of other direct services to learners and/or their parents (Moshoyannis, Pickett & Granick, 1999; Mueller, 1997). As a result, they have become "technicians who are more accurately described as paraeducators just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as paralegals and paramedics" (Pickett, 1989).

Impact of Evolving Teacher Roles

Inextricably tied to the increased reliance on paraeducators in more complex and demanding roles are various reform initiatives to redefine teacher roles and functions.The traditionally recognized planning, instructional, and learner evaluation responsibilities of teachers have changed dramatically and now include:

- greater involvement in shared decision making and other school based governance activities (David, 1996);
- participation in the alignment of curriculum content with higher learning standards and increased performance levels for all students established by States (Pickett 1999);
- membership on multidisciplinary teams with responsibility for planning education and therapeutic programs for individual learners (Friend & Cook, 1996; Villa, Thousand, Nevin & Malgeri, 1996).

These new program management and administrative functions are particularly apparent in the responsibilities of teachers in general and special education who work in classrooms and other learning environments serving learners with disabilities, Title I, ESL/multilingual and early childhood programs (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Friend & Cook, 1996).

An added dimension to the management functions of teachers are their responsibilities for directing and integrating paraeducators into service delivery teams, providing on-the-job coaching to paraeducators, monitoring their performance and sharing relevant information with principals (Pickett & Gerlach 1997, French & Pickett, 1997).

Emerging Paraeducator Roles

The move toward differentiated staffing across program lines in various education settings has had a profound impact on the nature and complexity of the roles of paraeducators (Pickett, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Mueller, 1997; Moshoyannis et al., 1999). Under the direction of teachers, paraeducators instruct learners in individual and small group settings, assist with functional assessment activities, administer standardized tests (teachers analyze test results), document learner performance, share relevant information with teachers and participate in program planning teams (Moshoyannis et al., 1999; Pickett, 1999; Mueller, 1997).

The Need for Policies and Infrastructures to Strengthen Teacher and Paraeducator Teams

Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reauthorized in 1997, requires State education agencies (SEAs) to ensure that "paraprofessionals" are appropriately trained and supervised, issues connected with the employment, assignment, preparation and supervision of paraeducators remain, for the most part, afterthoughts in the public policy arena. Despite increased utilization of paraeducators and increased emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles, opportunities for systematic training and career development have not kept pace. Few SEAs and LEAs are working together to:

- develop skill and knowledge standards that recognize the changing roles of paraeducators
- set skill standards for paraeducators working in different position levels
- create seamless career development models that include on-the-job coaching, inservice training and access to post-secondary education for paraeducators interested in becoming teachers
- establish supervisory responsibility and standards for monitoring paraeducator performance (Pickett and Gerlach, 1997; Pickett, 1999).

Further compounding the current situation is the fact that almost no experienced or new teachers are prepared at either the undergraduate or graduate level to supervise or monitor the work of paraeducators (French & Pickett, 1997; Pickett, 1999). Moreover only two States, Minnesota and Washington, have incorporated provisions into their credentialing systems that require teacher education programs to develop curriculum content to prepare teachers for their emerging roles (Pickett, 1999).

There are several essential policy questions and systemic issues that are central to the conceptualization and implementation of a comprehensive system of professional development for paraeducators. These questions cannot be addressed in a vacuum. They require the active participation of SEAs, LEAs, other provider agencies, professional organizations, and unions. Pickett (1999) has identified the following questions that require the joint attention of policymakers, implementers, personnel developers, and other stakeholders at the State and local levels.

- What are the indicators that roles for paraeducators in our State/locale are clearly defined?
- What standards exist in our State/locale for preparing paraeducators to work in different position levels and/or disciplines/programs? Are there opportunities for professional development and career advancement for paraeducators?
- Is there a credentialing system or mechanism for ensuring that paraeducators have the skills that they require? When was the current system established? Has it been revised recently? Is it competency based?
- Are there standards for the supervision of paraeducators? Are the standards part of the State's teacher licensure system? Are teacher education programs developing or revising course content to prepare their graduates to supervise paraeducators?
- What impact do Federal mandates and funding, State reimbursement policies and regulatory procedures, or local collective bargaining agreements have on the employment, training, and supervision of paraeducators?
- What are the current roles of the SEA, LEA, two- and four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs), professional organizations representing different disciplines, unions, and parents in setting standards for paraeducator utilization, professional development, credentialing, and supervision? What barriers exist in our State/locale for the development of standards and systems to improve the performance, supervision, and preparation of paraeducators? What resources are available to facilitate the development and implementation of standards and systems? How can the different constituencies contribute to the efforts to improve the performance of teacher/provider-paraeducator teams? How can we develop and strengthen partnerships among the different constituencies?

Summary

To more fully tap the resources of paraeducators as members of program implementation teams, different governmental and non-governmental organizations must form partnerships to address the policy questions described above. They must also work in concert to develop and maintain infrastructures that will ensure that both teachers and paraeducators are appropriately and effectively prepared for roles and responsibilities that are becoming more complex and demanding. This is not an easy task and requires a commitment of time and resources from the broad range of administrative and provider agencies, IHEs, and organizations that have different but related responsibilities for paraeducator utilization, supervision, and preparation.

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